



LIFE KEEPING
GENESIS 32: 22-31; LUKE 18:1-8
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
October 16, 2016
The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Pastor

A Sabbath Poem
by Wendell Berry

No, no, there is no going back.
Less and less you are
that possibility you were.
More and more you have become
those lives and deaths
that have belonged to you.
You have become a sort of grave
containing much that was
and is no more in time, beloved
then, now, and always.
And so you have become a sort of tree
standing over the grave.
Now more than ever you can be
generous toward each day
that comes, young, to disappear
forever, and yet remain
unaging in the mind.
Every day you have less reason
not to give yourself away.¹

This week has been heavy—heavy with grief, heavy with work, heavy with feelings
of helplessness, heavy with lies, heavy with truths.

How long, O Lord, will Haiti suffer and how many times will calamity strike her
people?

How long, O Lord, will carnage rage in Aleppo? And how long will violence tear apart
families, communities, nations, the world?

How long will women's bodies be objects of conquest and vulgarity and hatred?

How long, O Lord, will people have to hide who they love to protect themselves from
violence, from rejection by their families, from shaming by the very institutions that
claim to serve you?

How long, O Lord, will black and brown bodies carry the weight of our collective fears and our collective greed and our collective unwillingness to heal the wounds of racism?

How long?

Jacob wrestles with God all night long

Like a sleepless night

A troubled night when the weight of the world agitates and presses in.

That feeling inside when nothing seems right with the world.

Jacob struggles, Jacob wrestles, until God blesses him.

He emerges blessed, limping, knowing, remembering.

Friends, faith is impossible without such wrestling, without such struggle.

And faith without compassion is no faith at all.

Compassion is being present, being awake, being real.

Compassion is not a passive reality. It is hard won. It is the fruit of struggle. It is the gift of not succumbing to the things in life that could break us, that hold us captive to distorted, contorted ways of being human.

I know why the caged bird sings²

by Maya Angelou

A free bird leaps on the back
Of the wind and floats downstream
Till the current ends and dips his wing
In the orange sun's rays
And dares to claim the sky.

But a BIRD that stalks down his narrow cage
Can seldom see through his bars of rage
His wings are clipped and his feet are tied
So he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings with a fearful trill
Of things unknown but longed for still
And his tune is heard on the distant hill for
The caged bird sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
And the trade winds soft through
The sighing trees
And the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright
Lawn and he names the sky his own.

But a caged BIRD stands on the grave of dreams
His shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
His wings are clipped and his feet are tied
So he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings with
A fearful trill of things unknown
But longed for still and his
Tune is heard on the distant hill
For the caged bird sings of freedom.

Compassion is not pity, compassion is not charity.

Compassion pulls from our deepest impulses, our most radical connections to the world around us. Compassion is not born of duty, compassion is not conformity to laws or rules or norms.

It is a feeling, a presence, a way of being that does not seek to perfect, that does not let suffering have the last word, that does not focus itself on the end game, but on the moment at hand.

Compassion is about freedom. Freedom from loneliness, freedom from despair, from hopelessness. Compassion is about trusting life enough to give connection, to give relationship, to give taking another breath even when it hurts, to give another one who is in pain, to give your own pain a chance to meet a trustworthy and potent gentleness in a too-often brutal world.

Jesus tells a story of a man without a conscience. A man who doesn't care about much of anything but himself. A public official, a judge with no scruples, no religion, no regard for people, no shame, no sense of obligation.

A widow seeks him out over and over again asking him to make things right for her. It is both legally and biblically mandated to take care of widows.

But this judge only reacts because he wants her to leave him alone.

Not even from pity, not even from a changed mind or a moved heart, this judge reacts out of annoyance.

Jesus uses the callous judge as a foil for how much we can count on a categorically different reaction from God.

Compassion responds, compassion acknowledges, compassion feels with the suffering of another, compassion stays with the suffering of another.

Compassion is the opposite of annoyance; it is born of tenderness.

*Touched By An Angel*³
by Maya Angelou

We, unaccustomed to courage
exiles from delight
live coiled in shells of loneliness
until love leaves its high holy temple
and comes into our sight
to liberate us into life.

Love arrives
and in its train come ecstasies
old memories of pleasure
ancient histories of pain.
Yet if we are bold,
love strikes away the chains of fear
from our souls.

We are weaned from our timidity
In the flush of love's light
we dare be brave
And suddenly we see
that love costs all we are
and will ever be.
Yet it is only love
which sets us free.

(The remainder of the sermon was unscripted. An audio version is available online)

Thanks be to God.

¹ Wendell Berry, *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997*, (Counterpoint, 1999).

² Maya Angelou, "Caged Bird" from *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*, (Random House, 1994).

³ Maya Angelou, "Touched by an Angel." Online source:
<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/touched-by-an-angel/>